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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: OES DAS BALTON DISCUSSES OCEANS AND FISHERIES ISSUES

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¶1. (U) Summary. OES DAS Balton, Dr. Rebecca Lent of NOAA and Deirdre Warner-Kramer of OES shared USG views on oceans, fisheries, and related topics with Paolo Conversi, the Holy See official covering those subjects, during a productive meeting in Rome March 9. Conversi appreciated that the USG shares the Holy See's concerns over the dilemma of feeding the world's hungry through the bounty of the sea, while simultaneously addressing ever-more urgent issues of stewardship over those resources. Discussion touched on sustainable development; climate change; various instruments used to address oceans issues; USG assistance measures to developing countries; linkages to concerns such as trafficking, HIV, and human rights; and possible ways of future cooperation between the USG and Holy See in these areas. End summary.

¶2. (U) OES DAS David Balton met Dr. Paolo Conversi, the Holy See official overseeing oceans and fisheries affairs, on March 9. Also present were Dr. Rebecca Lent of NOAA, Deirdre Warner-Kramer of OES, and Charge d'Affaires.

¶3. (U) Conversi, who has a broad portfolio, was eager to hear the USG point of view. Balton noted that he had come to Rome to attend a biannual meeting of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's Committee on Fisheries (COFI), which is the most important of its kind, with a broad agenda, and well attended, including by NGOs of many stripes. The USG is working to address parallel problems: global fisheries are at or over capacity, but the world's people need the food that fisheries can provide. Responding to the Holy See's concern that developing countries be involved in a solution, Balton and his colleagues addressed a variety of approaches, including international instruments (global, regional, bilateral), laws both "hard" and "soft" (codes, etc), and the overriding need for effective implementation of existing measures. He explained the current emphasis on identifying and tackling illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The USG wants to help build capacity in developing countries through technical assistance, partnership and access agreements, training, and development aid.

¶4. (U) Conversi stressed the Holy See's interest in sustainable development and a responsible approach to the environment. Man must balance the needs of development with those of stewardship and feeding the hungry. With regard to fisheries, Conversi wondered about the appropriate role of aquaculture. Balton answered that aquaculture prompts legitimate concerns, but holds much promise at a time when the ocean catch has leveled off and is perhaps falling. One positive development is that the tenor of the debate has changed in recent years. Fisheries were once regarded in essentially commercial terms, but are now part of the larger environmental agenda. The USG positions in

international fora are underpinned by a strong conservation ethic, which also guides US domestic law and regulatory approaches. Charge d'affaires suggested that national bishops' conferences would constitute good fora for the USG and others to engage the world's Catholic population on this issue and said he would keep Conversi supplied with documents illustrating the USG perspective; Conversi gratefully accepted.

¶15. (U) Extending the discussion into other areas of great and related interest to the Holy See, Lent pointed out that fishing is an extremely hazardous occupation and has been unfortunately linked to human rights violations including forms of indentured servitude, and trafficking -- the ILO and IMO were concerned. Fishermen also have higher rates of HIV. Asked about biotechnology (another topic of interest here), Balton said there were some issues related to oceans and fisheries (e.g. fertilizer runoff causing algae blooms, etc. which could potentially be averted via use of biotech crops), but these had remained at a fairly low level in maritime fora.

¶16. (U) Conversi asked about the effects of climate change on fisheries. Balton said climate change affects migratory patterns and stocks distribution; some of this is cyclical, not a new issue; but the trend has been up. The warming of the oceans is a complex issue producing many kinds of effects, some positive to certain regions, but on the whole it is troubling. For example, greater acidification affects small crustaceans at bottom of food chain. The FAO as an institution has little mandate on climate change.

¶17. (U) Comment: Conversi certainly appreciated the opportunity to meet DAS Balton and his colleagues, and the meeting gave us an opportunity to sensitize him to USG concerns and pique his interest in a number of ways. The Holy See has been visibly raising its level of attention to environmental issues, and will host a conference on climate change in May. Church organizations and Holy See-related media offer an excellent way to reach the world's one billion Catholics, and Post looks forward to working with Department and other USG agencies to capitalize on this opportunity in the months to come.

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¶18. (U) DAS Balton has cleared this cable.
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